CHAPTER V

THE FATE OF THE WISE MEN

Diogenes Laertes believed that suicide was an end that the greatest leaders should counsel to the wisest men. It almost seemed a death that in itself conferred nobility upon the dead. They shared the glory of Cato, the determination of Seneca. Time plays tricks with these and all fancies. Its mutations are often effected in less than a generation. But the translation of Diogenes Laertes's wise men to the last circle of Dante's inferno took a thousand years. The mutilation of their bodies and the desecration of their memories, though whole-hearted, was a slow process. Only when the next turn of the wheel was already promised, and the Renaissance an imminent possibility, did the horror-struck peasants, the last vassals, and the Church, finally hand over the wise men to Dante in hell.

I. THE NEW RELIGION

Christianity, growing too large for the frame which had held it as a slip or seedling, burst the Roman world. Looking back, its disruptive anti-social elements strike one forcibly. It had new values to propound, but its methods were not tactful or economic. Causing infinite disturbance, it provoked in response infinite resistance.

The shortest way was assumed to be the best; the Church invited massacres when it might have brought off diplomatic

victories. It blundered into the Roman scheme, an obstinate mother of ceaseless upheavals; needless to say it met with fairly concerted opposition. But one is sometimes bound to wonder not at the sadistic clamour of the anti-Christian mobs but at the restraint of the Roman bureaucracy. Just as significant as the scenes in the arenas is the attitude of people like Pliny, who tried so patiently to find a *modus vivendi* with the Christian communities under their jurisdiction.

The rapidity of the spread of Christianity is noted in history books; it is even given a miraculous interpretation. And yet in 250 the Roman world was still essentially pagan. If this is a rapid spread, it is slow compared to the pace of the Prophet and will hardly keep up with the march of Mrs. Eddy's mystical army through the forty-eight states of the American Union. What seems in retrospect just as remarkable as the succession of Christian victories is the dogged resistance put up by the old pagan hierarchy. When one remembers that Jupiter had to share the honours with Heliogabalus, and that Imperial boys had clambered into Mount Olympus, it seems extraordinary that the gods should have been able to raise any popular feeling. Of course the goldsmiths of Ephesus were not the only people who had investments in established religion. In every city the counterpart of the Ephesians' Diana meant bread and butter; yet granted even the support of interest and the state machine the old gods lasted an extraordinarily long time.

Until A.D. 250 we can therefore regard the moral of the ancient world as pagan and its attitude to suicide the same as before the birth of Christ. But what about the Christian communities which had arisen in the heart of this pagan world? How far had they, by the middle of the third century, modified or altered among themselves the classical ideas and feelings about suicide?

In point of fact we find that these early Christians dis-

regarded suicide completely. Their moral attitude, in so far as such an attitude existed, was negative and uninterested. Actually of the four lines of thought which tended among the pagans to act as moral deterrents only one was relevant to the Church. The idea upheld by Plutarch, that suicide was inconsistent with human dignity and the heroic figure, carried no weight with the Christians, who laid emphasis on humility and the abject nature of unregenerated man. Aristotle's argument that a man did not belong to himself but to the state was equally foreign to an anti-patriotic sect that created the monastic ideal and that for allegiance to a community substituted allegiance to the Kingdom of Heaven. Lastly, the Neo-Platonists' idea that suicide was a perturbation of the soul and thus reprehensible (the attitude long after adopted by Schopenhauer) was of too philosophic a sort to interest the simple convert mentality. Only Plato's objection to suicide held good for the Christian: that self-destruction was tantamount to an act of desertion from the post where a Supreme Being had happened to station one. Later this idea was worked very hard, and the suicide became a person who destroyed divine property, a robber of God; but in these early centuries no definite attitude crystallized round this point, and suicide is not condemned by a single canonical text of the period.

Actually there is no real reason why suicide should have been condemned. One can trace two main characteristics in early Christianity: a horror of the world as it was, and a belief in salvation by faith. Neither of these things necessarily entail a condemnation of suicide. In fact, the first would be likely to encourage it. Later as the Christian antagonism to suicide developed, it is interesting to notice that the act was often condemned, not in itself but as proof that the suicide had despaired of God's grace; in other words, that he lacked faith. The early Christian found not a single reference in the New Testament to condemn suicide and St.

Paul's famous chapter on Charity (1 Cor. xiii. 3) classed self-destruction with other worthy but ineffectual approaches to grace, such as almsgiving and eloquence: "Though I give my body to be burned and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." St. Paul here apparently refers to voluntary martyrdom, and the text must have been a justification to the numberless Christians who compelled the state to take their lives. In Tertullian these gratuitous martyrs found an ardent apologist and continual exhortations to seek their own death. With citations from classic times he spurred them on, and even held that Jesus Christ on the cross had given up the ghost freely and voluntarily before the slow end by crucifixion overtook Him. He says, *spiritum cum verbo dimisit praevento carnificis officio*, and in this intriguing notion he was supported by Origen. Even St. Augustine said: "His soul did not leave His body constrained, but because He would, and when He would, and how He would." Behind such theories seems to be the idea that for the Godhead actually to die by the hand of man would be too great an indignity for spirit to undergo: thinking on rather the same lines the Docetae denied that the *actual* body of Christ was ever raised, or suffered, on the cross.

The courage of the early martyrs is beyond belief, and their disregard of pain is amazing and rather frightening. Nothing would deter them. The centurion Marcellus, who, on parade, threw down his arms, crying "I am a soldier of Jesus Christ," is a single example of what elsewhere converts did by crowds, always with the expectation and hope of death from a hostile mob. St. Cyprian, who wrote an apologia in fifteen letters, explaining his flight from martyrdom, nowhere puts forward the horror or sin of suicide as an excuse for his action. Such an argument would not have entered his head at the period. Clement of Alexandria, who, almost alone in those early days, condemns voluntary Christian suicide, does so not because suicide is inherently

wrong, but because the martyr puts temptation in the murderer's way. This, of course, is a typical line of thought and links up with the horror of murder and of blood-shedding common to the early Christians. What is interesting, however, is that this horror of blood, which was so strong that it made the early Christians refuse military service and so run foul of the authorities on one more point, was not apparently extended to the taking of one's own life.

II. THE EMBRYONIC SIN

With the fourth century, however, the beginnings of a change are visible. The Church wakes up, as it were, to the existence of suicide, and after a period of uncertainty adopts a hostile attitude that grows more and more absolute as the Middle Ages develop. From tentative disapproval, Church teaching drifts to denunciation, punishment and horror.

What were the reasons for this change in feeling? First, no doubt, must come the general decline in world civilization that set in about the third century and grew steadily more marked until the complete collapse of the Empire in the West and the coming of the Dark Ages. The *élite* and the educated, who in the previous centuries had opposed reason to the suicide-horror of the common people, grew fewer and less influential. All through the Empire, and particularly among the common Christians who were drawn from the most instinctive and credulous elements of the people, the old pagan-religious fear of suicide, with its roots in a tribal and almost prehistoric past, found no opposition. As the intellectual impetus and order of society failed, suicide again became a social crime. It is important to emphasize that this was an instinctive movement of the people, a transference of the popular pagan idea into a semi-Christianized world; it was imposed on the Church from below. It was not, as one has been given to understand, a transference of ideas from the

Fathers to the people, an infiltration from doctrinal writing into popular consciousness. It was a reverse movement, common on different planes everywhere in early Christianity and particularly in relation to birth, death, and superstition. In some places the transference of pagan ideas was cloaked; in others it remained unashamed. (In Brittany the Little Saints took over in a whole-hearted and business-like fashion the offices of the local pagan gods; and there are many shrines in Europe with a fine tradition of continuity that leads up to an orthodox saint through Roman worship and Druid sacrifice.)

The bases of such transferences were quite illogical; and revulsion from suicide, on its first appearance in Christianity, had no rational basis. It is interesting to notice that as the opposition to suicide stiffened, the early Christian passion not to shed blood lost strength. The latter might, from a start, have provided a reasoned attack on suicide, but the excellent ideal was forced to modify itself to suit circumstances. Enlistment in the armies became common and recognized, and in 314 the Council of Arles went to the astonishing length of excommunicating deserters.

As might be expected, the horror of suicide first found concrete expression in Egypt, where Christianity was perhaps more than elsewhere a popular religion. The extreme peasant character of the Church and of its monastic developments in the Nile Valley and in the surrounding deserts, led to anti-suicide customs at a very early date. Already in 346 Egypt foreshadowed later procedure in the West by denying funeral rites to suicides. (It is true that this legislation may have had a purely practical and social side as suicide was unusually common in the desert monasteries.)

Once the primitive attitude to suicide was accepted by the Fathers, and the Church had fallen into line, the movement gathered a new and artificial impetus. The mind of the Church was called upon to give both a dogmatic and rational

platform to peasant prejudice and to provide the intensifying attack on suicide with a body of respectable arguments. The doctrine of immortality and the writings of the Neo-Platonists were the point of departure chosen by most writers.

If the soul was immortal and due to square its moral account either in heaven or hell, suicide, far from being an escape or a lapse into blessed quiescence, became merely the best possible passport to eternal torment. Life was a gift direct from God, as even the misguided Plato had rightly said, and its rejection must inevitably anger Him. To kill oneself was to frustrate God's purpose, it was to kill one of His specially created beings. It was a sinful act and came in time, perhaps, to be the most sinful of all acts, possible only under the direct inspiration of the devil. For the homicide there might be some mercy, but for the murderer of himself no circumstances were thought extenuating. Judas, theologians came to the conclusion, had not sinned irreparably in betraying Christ; not until he committed suicide had he damned himself out of hand. The Christian idea of the rights and value of the individual life, which led to their attack on the abortion and infanticide generally practised in the Empire, was the chief prop in a rationalization of the suicide-horror. It led to a paradox that lasted twelve centuries: though the life of the individual was valuable only in itself, in relation to its own divine problem and not to the community, yet the individual could not end this life of his if he found it intolerable or useless. In passing, it is worth noting how the sadistic element of Catholicism, its moral rather than its religious side, as it began to develop, would instinctively oppose the early release from pain offered by suicide. As the function of the Church became largely one of compulsion, this attitude would tend to grow more pronounced. Suicide became reprehensible in so far as the command "love one another"

was substituted by "believe in this organization and set of dogmas or be damned".

Beside the prejudice of the people and the rationalizations of the Church, there appeared a third factor ranged against suicide. It was the important economic deterrent, inherited from the slave system of classical times and which the growth of feudalism strengthened and developed. For economic reasons the noble put his whole weight into the balance against suicide at the same time as the priest and the peasant. If he acted for different reasons it was none the less with equal decision. Under the feudal system everyone was somebody else's "man", so any suicide, however humble, was a robbery of some superior and a breach of fealty. The classical attitude to slave suicide was now *logically* applicable to the whole of society. The nobles saw to it that it was *actually* applied to the lower sections. Fear of losing one's "man" undoubtedly played a large part in the suicide legislation of the Middle Ages, and accounts for the purely deterrent character of many suicide penalties. Public exposure of the corpse and its degrading cartage through the streets (see page 140) are obviously measures intended to create fear and aversion in the people. It is irrational and rather useless to explain them as posthumous punishments, which is the usual reason given; nor do they fit in with expiatory theories and the sort of thing done to cleanse a community from blood-guilt. The economic-feudal pressure brought to bear against suicide was wide and intense, and it is interesting while on this point to notice that nobles were often exempted from the necessary penalties. In France, at any rate, the suicide laws seem rarely to have been enforced against the feudal lords.

The references of Shakespeare's grave-digger to the death of Ophelia in *Hamlet* seem to point to a similar exemption in England at a later date. "Will you h'a the truth on't? If this had not been a gentlewoman she should have been

buried out of Christian burial. . . . Great folk shall have countenance in this world to drown themselves more than their even Christian."

Finally, a quotation from the *Connoisseur* shows that a rather similar distinction was still made in the eighteenth century:

> A penniless poor dog, who has not left enough to defray the funeral charges, may perhaps be excluded the churchyard, but self-murder by a pistol genteely mounted, or a Paris-hilted sword, qualifies the polite owner for a sudden death and entitles him to a pompous burial.

Perhaps the most striking instance of the purely economic side of the anti-suicide prejudice is to be found in the measures passed at the Council of Arles in 452. These measures are not, as a casual interpretation might lead one to think, directed against suicide in general. They apply only to servants (*famuli* is the word used) and are simply a repetition of the Roman slave legislation about suicide. The Christian bishops at Arles, in fact, did little but reaffirm the stigma which long before had been attached to suicide in the statutes of the Imperial College at Lanuvium, an institution largely devoted to the education of slaves. The Council really broke no new ground and it gave no expression to the growing psychological horror of suicide as such. Not the act, but dislike of its repercussions as they effect the master and landowner, provides the motive which makes the act criminal in certain cases and envisages the suicide as *diabolico repletus furore*.

But though bishops, landowners, and land-tillers came for different reasons to range themselves against suicide, the change in opinion took time. The intelligent tradition of the old world and probably a small and living minority of educated people in the new, formed a bulwark difficult to break down. There seems to have been no canonical

legislation against suicide generally (the *act* condemned rather than a class of persons committing the act) until the Council of Braga in 563 and no civil legislation until even later.

The writings of the ecclesiastics in the fourth and fifth centuries, mirror the uncertainty that existed even in the Church. Though these writers generally condemn the act, they do not yet demand penalties. The question is still in the melting-pot; fit for discussion rather than punishment. While St. Jerome angrily condemns the melancholy of the age which leads to suicide, the old support of a sophisticated society lingered on in St. Athanasius's approval. It is perhaps only the weight and influence of St. Augustine that settles the question. The *City of God* says plainly enough "that suicide is a detestable and damnable wickedness". St. Augustine produces four arguments to justify his statement which are of great importance, since, for some time, they were the basis of the Church's anti-suicide teaching.

First, Augustine points out that no private individual may take it upon himself to kill a guilty person. The condemnation of murderers and sinners rests with Church and State. Therefore, however aware a person may be of sin and guilt in himself, he has no right to take his own life. As a corollary, the more innocently a man has lived, the more criminally he acts in killing himself; "innocent" blood is on his head. This argument disposed of the idea that certain suicides, as from remorse, might fairly be regarded as expiatory. It countered Petilian's claim, who said that in his suicide Judas showed proof of his repentance and wiped his score clean with his own blood.

Augustine's second line of attack was based on the sixth commandment: *non occides*. The suicide who takes his own life has killed a man. Both logically and in the eyes of God he is no better than a homicide. This argument, because apparently so simple, was eagerly taken up, found

general acceptance, and later was chiefly responsible for the classification of suicide as a felony (*felo de se*) in civil law.

Augustine's third line was, oddly enough, stoical in conception, though to give it authority he was forced to deny the Stoics and to attribute Cato's death to weakness. The truly noble soul, he said, will bear all suffering; to escape, even when there is no reason for staying, is testimony of weakness. To this may be added the conception of the "soldier of Christ" which gave a purely religious twist to Stoicism: the pains we suffer are not our own, but are undergone in the service of Christ, either directly as martyrs or in so far as we are part of the plan whereby the world exists only for its own eventual regeneration.

Augustine's last argument had to do directly with the contemporary scene, as many Christians in the early centuries committed suicide for fear of falling before temptation. They preferred to sacrifice a score of years on earth, rather than lose eternity in heaven. Augustine argued, however, that suicide was a sin greater than any they could avoid by its commission, and that the suicide died the worst of sinners. The logical outcome of their line of thought would be, as he pointed out, suicide immediately after baptism: only so would a direct passage to heaven be absolutely certain.

In spite of the diatribes of the Fathers and of the anti-suicide prejudice which was hardening into a set mould throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, three points remained unsettled and three types of suicide, even if officially condemned, were excused by the man in the street. The cause of endless controversy and fairly common in occurrence, these three types strike the characteristic note of the early Christian centuries. Suicide, in so far as it was acknowledged or allowed to come before the public eye, appeared in one of these three forms.

First in importance, frequency, and respectability, came voluntary martyrdom.

III. THE GLORIOUS COMPANY OF MARTYRS

Accounts vary infinitely as to the number of the early martyrs. It has been said that "As in the passover from Egypt every door was sprinkled with blood", and again, that in the Roman Martyrologia "there is no day which hath not five hundred martyrs". Such estimates, however, are too vague. Sozomen, writing of the Diocletian persecutions in the fourth century says that in Syria and Persia alone there were 16,000 martyrs "whose names had been ascertained", not to mention legions who were nameless. Gibbon, with more probability, puts the total number for the Empire during the same period at 1500, nine of whom were bishops. The truth must lie nearer Gibbon's figure when it is remembered that only one man in twelve was a Christian before the conversion of Constantine and that on the whole no law could have provided more loopholes than the Roman. The life of a bishop, as facts show, was often safer than that of an Emperor: during the ten years in which Cyprian successfully ruled the see of Carthage, four Emperors were killed, sharing their violent deaths with their families, favourites and slaves.

Whatever the number of the Christian martyrs, one fact at any rate is certain, a very large percentage of them gave up their lives voluntarily, going out deliberately to procure their own self-destruction. It was hardly an unusual thing to journey, as did St. Anthony, in the persecutions of Diocletian, a full 200 miles with no object in view but to secure one's own death. The corollary of eternal life, the other side of the picture, hardly obtrudes itself in the endless account of knives, fires, roastings, mutilations, and wild beasts. The overwhelming desire to suffer voluntarily, "to testify to the faith", ousts every other consideration. In modern jargon we might call this masochism and quote Ignatius's words when he writes of the arena: "Let me

enjoy these beasts whom I wish much more cruel than they are; and if they will not attempt me, I will provoke and draw them by force."

Contemporary thought and custom enhanced the desirability of martyrdom. For the martyr, his sacrifice secured honour and perpetual commemoration; for his family it meant support and an income from the Church funds. Such a death, better than any other, opened the road to heaven: baptism purged a Christian from original sin, and martyrdom cleared him from the sins of a lifetime. In addition, martyrs were the popular figures of the period. A general enthusiasm for the state of martyrdom extended the honour to a child "which dies in his mother's womb if she be a martyr", to all the infants slain by Herod,[1] and later to eleven thousand virgins. Some even, among them Ignatius in his epistles, styled themselves martyrs, though they never died. Finally, martyrdom came to be regarded as a trenchant form of argument, and heretics calculated the virtue of their sect by the number of their dead.

The Christian desire to seek out voluntary martyrdom, rather than to have it imposed by force, was met half-way by the gentleness of Imperial policy and the tenor of Imperial legislation. Rome did not eagerly seize the heretics and rarely *forced* martyrdom on the Christians. It was the latter who insisted that Roman governors should inflict the full powers which they possessed. Until personally insulted and angered, the attitude of the average Roman official in the execution of his duties was one of deprecation or perplexity.

[1] The cult of the Innocents seems to have been widespread and important. Saint Louis presented to Nôtre Dame in a crystal bowl *un innocent entier*. The adjective is amusing and indicates the relic-hunting snobbery that prevailed. It was essential to procure a fine 'specimen'. In the fifteenth century a procession of children estimated at over twelve thousand escorted the body of one such Innocent across Paris.

Pliny the Younger is a typical example. He was reluctant to convict the Christians under his jurisdiction, and with the Imperial tradition of toleration behind him, he could see nothing wrong (though much fantastic) in their beliefs. It was only their self-sufficiency, priggishness, and isolation from the community, their refusal to play at the game of God-Emperor, that he found dangerous and anti-social. In a letter to the Emperor Trajan, asking for a clear line of policy on the subject, he says that not their conduct "but their inflexible obstinacy appears deserving of punishment". Nine out of ten of his contemporaries must have thought more or less the same. It is on record that a frantic pro-consul faced by a mob of Christians demanding martyrdom, shouted, "Goe hang and drown your selves and ease the Magistrates."

The policy outlined by Trajan in his reply to Pliny is characteristic of the pagan attitude which, with short breaks, prevailed until paganism itself went under. It makes every attempt to meet Christian obstinacy half-way.

> No charges against Christians [he says] are to be anonymous, and when made must be supported by circumstantial evidence. When finally guilt is proved, Christians are still to be offered life and freedom. All that is asked is that they shall prove their good faith by a single sacrifice to the orthodox gods. The duty of the judges is not so much to punish as reclaim and only when every effort has failed are the punishments to be applied.

A final point in the application of anti-Christian laws seems to us now lenient to the point of foolishness. Between the accusation of a Christian and his appearance for trial, there was generally a liberal lapse of time granted, ostensibly for the preparation of a defence, but tacitly is was regarded as a good opportunity for flight until trouble blew over. The existence of such a clause, though it was not always in force, proves both an unwillingness to convict and the self-inflicted nature of many martyrdoms. Though under Diocletian the

laws were temporarily stiffened, and to hold a Christian service was directly punishable by death, yet the same element of volition appears in the accounts of martyrdoms at that time.

This suicidal element in martyrdom is perhaps natural if one takes into account the psychology of the Christians. Eusebius tells of a man who, having been condemned to death over a slow and lingering fire, "leaping and exulting with joy gave thanks to God with a loud voice, who had honoured him with a martyrdom". In Phrygia three Christians who had destroyed pagan idols voluntarily gave themselves up to authority, and refusing to sacrifice, were duly ordered to die on gridirons. As the process went forward, they called to the governor, "Amachus, give orders that our bodies may be turned on the fire if you do not desire to be served with meat cooked only on one side." Donne tells of an old wretched man, who passing by after the execution of a whole legion of 666, by iterated decimation, under Maximianus, "wish't that he might have the happiness to be with them and so *extorted* a Martyrdome".

Such an attitude was hardly likely to take advantage of Roman clemency, and time and again we see suicidal tactics forcing the hands of a reluctant governor. Numberless stories witness the aggressiveness of these early Christian martyrs, many of whom died not for their religion but for their insolence. The destruction of Diocletian's edict at Nicomedia is famous. Less well known perhaps is the story of the lady who, when called upon in the presence of the governor to contribute her pinch of incense to the gods, kicked over the altar. Not unnaturally she was beheaded.

Though they can have had no doubt about the penalties, it was common enough for Christians even to disrupt pagan services and to desecrate the public idols. In Phrygia a whole congregation of Christians preferred to be burnt alive in the

walls of their church, rather than give up the building to the Roman authorities. On another occasion Babylas, whose church was visited by Decius in a moment of curiosity, barred the door to the Emperor, saying that no wolf should enter his fold. The Emperor went away, but the Christian, as he must have expected, lost his life.

Stories of less actively aggressive but quite effective suicide-martyrdoms are equally common. Few people took the legal opportunity of removing from areas of persecution and cases of actual self-accusation abound. Once condemned it was usual to court the flames, to exasperate lions, or, like Agapius, to hug the oncoming bear. One story in the typical tradition illustrates this semi-suicide. Six young men, having bound their hands together to forestall individual changes of opinion, rushed before a provincial governor presiding over the games, and confessed their faith. Their disappointment was intense when they were not thrown to the animals, and their wishes were only partially gratified by a later decapitation.

Perhaps, however, the strangest suicidal deaths of the period occurred among the heretical Donatists and Circumcelliones in North Africa. When threatened with persecution they killed themselves in vast numbers. St. Augustine says that " assembling in hundreds they leaped with paroxysms of frantic joy from the brows of overhanging cliffs, till the rocks below were reddened with their blood ". The Father thoroughly disapproved of their precipitations and added that they consecrated their martyrdom to the Devil who tempted Christ to throw Himself down.

This whole question of martyrdom and suicide is strange, and histories of the times fill one alternatively with horror and admiration. Faith and courage have perhaps never existed in such degree among large numbers of people as among the early Christians. One can only admire these virtues. Their passionate disregard for life, however, involves

other questions: there seems something a little perverted in their welcome of pain and a sort of biological insanity in their determination to destroy their flesh and root out their own lives. As Donne says, that age was so hungry and ravenous of martyrdom, "that many were baptized only because they would be burnt".

Contemporary thought, also, realized that there were two sides to the picture. As voluntary martyrdom increased people began to doubt its use and validity. Though popular praise was always active for the suicide-martyrs, the official Church attitude became more and more disapproving. In the third century Tertullian had been strongly in support of Christians remaining to await martyrdom, rather than of their availing themselves of the chance of escape generously provided by the law; and even St. Augustine had said that the Good Shepherd must give His life for His flock and not remove to a neighbouring town. By about 450, however, Sozomen in his ecclesiastical history could posit, without comment, "the divine precept which commands us not to expose ourselves to persecution". Such suicide was no longer recognized as martyrdom. Neither were the deaths directly provoked by Christian aggression, for the Council of Illiberis refused to honour those who procured their own death by publicly desecrating the idols.

Opposition to the suicide-martyr had a further basis. By A.D. 300, as Eusebius perhaps overstates, the Church had "sunk into negligence and sloth, one envying and reviling another in different ways . . . and hypocrisy and dissimulation had arisen to the greatest heights of malignity". In such communities people burdened with poverty and debts often found suicide-martyrdom their most honourable and practical exit, ensuring as it did support and provision for their family. Other even subtler rogues adopted the procedure of suicide-martyrdom in order to obtain the alms and gifts showered on such faithful sufferers in prison; they took

care, however, that the machinery of legislation did not take them farther than their cells whence timely recantation eventually restored them to liberty.

IV. IN DESERTS, CAVES, AND CELLS

The second type of suicide which the Church could not bring itself to condemn unanimously was that which the ascetics inflicted on themselves by intense privations. The whole question was a little delicate and uncertain, because an extremely and even morbidly rigorous rule tended in certain cases to produce paradoxically long life. St. Anthony, foremost of the Egyptian hermits (who were the ascetics *par excellence*) lived to be one hundred and four, and St. Jerome's monk who existed in a hole on a diet of four figs a day apparently was none the worse for it. It was a kill-or-cure procedure.

However, there is no doubt that suicide either indirectly through starvation and maceration of the body, or directly as a result of manias and depression was fairly common, particularly in the Eastern monasteries. St. Palaemon apparently died of his asceticisms, and St. Simeon Stylites is a yet more famous example of a long life finally terminated by direct privation and mistreatment. For thirty years the saint stood on his sixty-foot pillar near Antioch with a magnificent disregard for his person. Eventually an untreated ulcer killed him. Gibbon makes a typical pun on the subject: "The progress of an ulcer in his thigh might shorten, but it could not disturb this *celestial* life." The brutal self-disciplines and strange ascetic practices of the early monks and hermits were various and always severe. From the βόσκοι, or grazers of Syria ("they each took a sickle and cut some grass on the mountains; and this served for their repast") to monks, like a certain Valens who would neither eat nor even take the communion, saying "I need not the supper, for I

have this day seen the Lord", their intense privations led to madness and death.

More frequent, however, were the suicides that occurred from remorse, hopelessness, and despair of virtue, among those who were unable to live up to the monastic ideal. These deaths took place chiefly among young men who tried in vain to twist a normal nature into the unnatural moulds of celibacy and solitary seclusion. In innumerable instances the fight between chastity and nature was too exhausting, and as the weight of repressions piled up the victim committed suicide to escape inevitable defeat. In this struggle the great Pachomius applied asps to himself—luckily in vain—and St. Anthony, with apparent equanimity, saw a despairing brother fling himself into a baker's oven. Pachomius's contemporary biographer says that in this fight with the devil "many have destroyed themselves; some, bereft of their senses, have cast themselves from precipices; others laid open their bowels; others killed themselves in divers ways". There is no doubt also that into these suicides there often entered an element of martyrdom, the notion that a man would rather die than suffer the loss of his virtue. Though never countenanced by the Church, these curious heroic suicides were common enough to attract the attention of St. Chrysostom. In a letter to a rich young man, named Stagirius, who had turned monk but was unequal to the demands his rule made upon him, Chrysostom gave warning against the temptation of suicide, and pointed out the general wickedness and uselessness of the act in such a situation.

Death as a result of voluntary privations was looked on in a very different light and considered, at any rate in the early days of monasticism, as a blessed ending. Public opinion, however, slowly veered away from extreme asceticism and with the modification of monastic life dangerous privation was no longer a virtue. The coming of the

Benedictines in the West and the restriction of the Egyptian rule completed a revulsion in taste and practice. St. Jerome's story of a certain Blesilla, retailed in delicious language by Lecky, is interesting not only in its typicality but because it shows a certain popular distaste for ascetic excesses even at an early date. By the premature death of her husband this unfortunate lady "lost at once the crown of virginity and the pleasure of marriage". Struck down with grief, she went into a convent; there, thinking on her sins, she soon came to regret the loss of her maidenhood more than that of her husband. To expiate the former she embarked on a long series of penances, so drastic that they caused her death. On her mother's grief and her own foolish end becoming known, the local populace made a great display of indignation. The scenes at her funeral proved that healthy reactions to such perversion were not absolutely inhibited outside monastic circles.

While on the subject of self-inflicted privations, a note on Origen is perhaps to the point. He, like certain others, doubting the outcome of his combat for chastity, committed a semi-suicide, or, as Gibbon tactfully puts it, "judged it the most prudent to disarm the tempter". Biologically speaking, castration may well be the only quite effective form of suicide. The father who kills himself makes but half a job of it, and life continues to torment his sons. The Church soon recognized the suicidal element in such an act. His detractors held it up against Origen, and later one of the Apostles, Canons laid it down that "He that gelds himself cannot be a clerke, *because he is an homicide of himselfe*, and an enemy to God's creature".[1]

[1] Antiquity provided two famous but rather different cases of self-mutilation. Democritus was said to have put out his eyes, being unwilling to witness the evils of his day. Leaena, the Athenian courtesan, afraid of betraying the liberal patriot, Harmodius, when put to the torture, bit out her tongue. The grateful Athenians set up to her memory the statue of a tongueless lion (leaena).

V. DE VIRGINIBUS

The last type of suicide which troubled the fathers and called forth the casuistry of the Church, was that committed to save virgin or married chastity. At this remove the whole business seems very odd and it is difficult for us to see how it could have been possible to class such a suicide as either right or wrong. To get the proper perspective one has not only to adopt the anti-suicide ideas of the early Church, but to envisage chastity as something with a *constant* value, quite apart from its possessor. To-day chastity is what a woman thinks it is worth. No more and no less. Its value, great or small, transcendental or practical, depends on the attitude of its possessor. One knows people who would indeed commit suicide to preserve it, and others who for the same reason would hardly walk across the street if it were inconvenient. To-day it would obviously be as impossible as it was in Roman times to say whether or not such a suicide was "exaggerated" and "unnecessary".

Before going into the question of this type of suicide in early Christian times, we need some sort of explanation why chastity became such an absolute virtue and such an institution. Why did a little mitre-like cap of purple wool, the badge of professed virginity, become an honourable symbol rather than the sign of failure, or the rare curiosity, that it would have been among the pagans? As Gibbon says, "It was with the utmost difficulty that Rome could support the institution of six vestals; but the primitive Church was filled with a great number of persons of either sex who had devoted themselves to the profession of perpetual chastity."

Such a change obviously needs some explaining, and the usual reasons derived direct from the New Testament, though effective, are not quite enough. We read into the gospels too much that we have acquired from our social

environment. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" has acquired an unfortunately limited reference. Purity, thanks perhaps to the public school tradition, has come to mean sex; its socially more important application to business, politics, and so on, is obscured. At the start the scriptures were not so confined in their application, but the early Christian found, on the other hand, a situation where ideals of chastity were socially of the greatest use and importance. First of all the Roman Empire and Roman freedom, by cutting across national and local ties, was leading to the breakdown of the family. The Church, on the other hand, wished to increase its solidity and, by using the family as the cellular basis of its organization, to oppose its authority and weight to that of the pagan state. The exaltation of married chastity was certainly the surest way of rehabilitating family institutions.

In a broader sense chastity was also a necessary ideal and counterpoise to the licentiousness of the time—a licentiousness that was dangerous in its ruthless methods and lack of proportion. Chastity was a timely self-preservative adopted by a wise section of society. The reign of Maxentius produced in Saint Sophronia, perhaps the most famous of the suicides for chastity, and one has only to look at Eusebius's account of the morals of the time to see that drastic reaction was necessary. The Emperor himself was

> sunk into every kind of wickedness, leaving no impurity or licentiousness untouched; separating wives from their lawful husbands, and after abusing these, sending them most shamefully violated back to their husbands. And these things he perpetrated not upon mean and obscure individuals, but insulting more particularly those that were most distinguished in the senate. . . . Initiating the soldiers, by luxury and intemperance, into every species of dissipation and revelling; encouraging the governors and generals, by rapacity and avarice, to proceed with their oppressions against their subjects, with almost the power of associate tyrants. . . . There was not a city that he passed through in

which he did not commit violence upon females. And in these he succeeded against all but the Christians. For they, despising death, valued his power but little.

From *some* part of the community a protest had to come against such a state of affairs in this and other reigns—and, as so often, it came from the Christians. As a result we meet, everywhere throughout the Empire, suicide for the sake of chastity. Of course such a line was not new. Leukatas, to escape the unwelcome love of Apollo, had plunged off a cliff into the Aegean, and St. Jerome recalled to the Christians the noble end of Lucrece and Dido. At all events, within the Empire the habit spread.

There are many stories, but it will develop the situation adequately if we look at the cases of two martyrs to chastity who were famous in their time, and around whose example the theoreticians subsequently waged protracted battles.

Sophronia ("far above all the most admirable", as her historian says) was a married Christian lady of standing and reputation who was unfortunate enough to attract the eye and interest of the Emperor Maxentius. She is said to have been the second Roman woman to take the vow of poverty and chastity, though this does not seem to fit in with the fact of her marriage. At all events she was an exemplary wife and firmly resisted the Emperor's tempestuous advances. At last the latter approached her husband and demanded that she should be given up. He, though Prefect of Rome, valued his life and knew well enough the penalties of refusal. He consented. When the tyrant's creatures burst into the house to carry her off, Saint Sophronia—as she was afterwards to be—met them with a show of resignation and simply asked for a few minutes in which fitly to adorn herself for the Emperor's arms. Having gone into her room, instead of applying cosmetics to her lips, she plunged a dagger into her breast. Her dead body was left for the Emperor.

Equally renowned were Domnina and her two beautiful daughters who committed suicide in the persecution of Diocletian when they had fallen into the hands of the soldiery on the road to Antioch.

> The mother . . . being at a loss for herself and daughters, knowing what dreadful outrages they would suffer from the men, represented their situation to them and, above all, the threatened violation of their chastity, an evil more to be dreaded than any other, to which neither she nor they should listen even for a moment.

To cut the story short, they decided that the only hope of delivery was "to betake themselves to the aid of Christ". A deep and swift river ran beside the road down which they were being escorted. Having asked their guards to retire for a moment, without hesitation they "cast themselves into the flowing river", and so died.[1]

[1] Accounts of this suicide vary. Some writers say that only the daughters committed suicide, and that one of them was that Pelagia who is celebrated in the Church calendar on the 9th of June as virgin and martyr. Donne retails one tradition of her death, with her sister, in a fine passage: "Having drest her selfe as a Bride, and going to the water, Here, sayes she, let us be baptized; this is the Baptisme where sinnes are forgiven, and where a kingdom is purchased: and this is the baptisme after which none sinnes. This water regenerates; this makes us virgines, this opens heaven, defends the feeble, delivers from death, and makes us Martyrs. Only we pray to God, that this water scatter us not, but reserve us to one funerall. Then entered they as in a dance, hand in hand, where the torrent was deepest, and most violent. And thus dyed . . . these Prelates of virginitie, Captaines of Chastitie, and companions in Martyrdome."

The Renaissance comment on such suicides is interesting by contrast, and strictly practical in tone. Montaigne writes: "*Un savant aucteur de ce temps, et notamment parisien, se mette en peine de persuader aux dames de nostre siecle de prendre plustot tout aultre party, que d'entrer en l'horrible conseil d'un tel desespoir. Je suis marry qu'il n'a sceu, pour mesler a ses contes, le bon mot que*

Such honourable and determined women were inevitably examples for imitation, and on the capture of Rome in 410 by Alaric and his barbarian forces the number of such suicides grew alarming. The Church had obviously to define its position. Though Saints Ambrose and Jerome had both written in praise of women who gave their lives for chastity, opinion began to veer, and even here the general prejudice against suicide exerted its influence. As on other questions, it was the authority of St. Augustine that seems to have turned the scale. Augustine's arguments against this sort of suicide are set out at length in the *Civitatis dei* and are worth considering in some detail, not only as an example of the odd angle from which these problems were tackled, but because his ideas were the basis of the ecclesiastical attitude of later times. Augustine begins by arguing that anyway no virgin can lose her fundamental chastity by violation, since real chastity is an attribute of the soul and not of the body. It is, in fact, a thing that no other person can steal. Thus a virgin has no real cause for suicide; and if she does commit it "she commits certain homicide to prevent a crime which is uncertain as yet, and not her own". He goes on to examine the whole question in the light of Lucrece's death. Approaching the affair from the point of view of the sins involved, he shows the unreasonableness and disproportion of her actions. Tarquin's son, guilty of a serious crime, is merely banished; while she, the innocent, dies. She has, in fact, committed a worse crime against herself than her violator did: "Lucrece, so celebrated and lauded, slew the innocent, chaste, outraged Lucrece." But *was* she perhaps conscious of some guilt? In that case, though still wrong, her suicide would not have been so shocking a crime as when directed against a more virtuous

j'apprins a Toulouse, d'une femme passee par les mains des soldats: 'Dieu soit loue, disoit elle, qu'au moins une fois en ma vie je m'en suis saoulee sans peche!'"

and innocent self. True virtue, he concludes, is to be found in those Christian women who, whatever their physical fate, "within their own souls, in the witness of their own conscience . . . enjoy the glory of chastity".

To maintain his thesis Augustine was now obliged to explain the conduct of holy women, like Sophronia and Domnina, *quorum memoria celebratur in ecclesia*. He did so by resorting to the idea that a chosen few had acted under a special divine revelation; but he warns his readers against presumptuously supposing that they are the recipients of any such revelation. He warns them to stop and think, "for those who die by their own hand have no better life after death".[1]

His attack on this sort of suicide ends with the tenuous consolation that such troubles produce humility and are good for the unnatural pride of virgins and chaste women. Also, he points out that for the barbarian violators, life, even if merry, is short in the measure of eternity. Their score waits to be settled. "For some most wicked and flagrant desires are allowed free play at present by the secret judgment of God, and are reserved to the public and final reckoning."

However, in spite of Saint Augustine's onslaught, chastity-suicide was never altogether established as a sin. Adelhemus, a famous Bishop of Malmesbury, wrote of the "blessed" virgins who gave up their lives in this way, and much later a Jesuit historian called Maria Cornelia, who, when separated from her husband by Pedro the Cruel, killed

[1] Though suicide to preserve chastity was condemned, the more aesthetically unpleasing practice of mutilation apparently escaped official censure. In 870 Ebba, a Yorkshire abbess, and all the nuns in her convent, when besieged by the Danes cut off their upper lips and noses rather than endanger their virtue. Later they were imitated by the Sisters of St. Clare who took the same precautions to preserve their chastity at the siege of Acre. The infidels, not unjustly incensed at the sight they presented, put the ladies to death.

herself for fear that she might not be able to live decently single, *insigne studium castitas*. A vague sympathy, voiced now and again by such ecclesiastics, continued for centuries, until in time changes in social manners and opinions made the problem in Western Europe one of almost purely academic interest.

VI. THE LAW

Having seen a mounting wave of disapproval wash away the older Stoic and intellectual bases on which the tolerance of suicide once rested, it remains to trace this disapproval as it naturally translated itself into pains, penalties, and legal statutes. By the end of the fifth century suicide had become an act tainted with superstitious horror; not even the virgin, the ascetic, or the martyr could take this way out with impunity. Half the distance has been covered between Diogenes Laertes's elect brotherhood and the seventh circle of Dante's hell; the suicide is condemned; he is not yet punished. His fate, however, was only a matter of time: in a universally Catholic Europe the progress from sinner to criminal was almost automatic.

The early codes of Theodosius and Justinian show the older Roman attitude to suicide legally unaltered. In itself it is not an offence. The law only recognizes its existence when committed by a slave or when linked to some other criminal action. Its first appearance in Canon law seems to be at the Council of Arles, but here again (see p. 115) it is not penalized in itself, and the Council in practice does little more than reaffirm the Imperial slave clause. The first real divergence from the old civil code came in 533, when the Council of Orleans denied funeral rites to suicides accused of crime, though it allowed them to *ordinary criminals*. But it was not until later in the sixth century when the universal success of barbarism had destroyed the last vestiges of classic rationalism and the instinctive prejudices of the un-

educated had free play in Europe that the Church legislated against suicide *per se*. It was the Council of Braga in 563 which took the decisive step. *All* suicides were to be penalized. "For those that kill themselves there shall be no commemoration at the oblation [mass] nor shall they be brought to burial with psalms." No exception or distinction of any sort was made. On paper no privileged class could hope for commemoration in the Eucharist or psalms at burial. Every motive and every method—*aut per ferrum, aut per venenum, aut praecipitium, aut suspendium*—were equally culpable. The Council of Auxerre fifteen years later reaffirmed these penalties and the principle of indiscriminate condemnation.

The Antisidor Council of 590 added a further clause which is interesting: "If any kill themselves *istorum oblata non recipiantur*, their offerings shall not be received." This seems to show that there was still some perplexity in the air about the rightness or wrongness of the act and that suicides thought it worth while to make offerings which they hoped would expiate any degree of sinfulness they might be guilty of. This evidently was an inconvenient practice which put the Church in an awkward position; hence its abolition.

The Church had now straightened out its position—to its theoretical condemnation there corresponded a system of penalties to punish and deter. The next centuries saw little alteration of the Canon law and it was not until 1284 that the final ecclesiastical penalty was imposed. The Synod of Nimes then refused suicides even the right of a quiet interment on holy ground.[1] The Church had now done its job, and having indicated the attitude which the secular authorities should take, left them in the certainty that they would carry on her work.

[1] The priest in *Hamlet*, speaking of Ophelia, may be supposed to give a very fair picture of the treatment accorded by the Church to less fortunate suicides at a later period. He says:

The Council of Hereford in 673, which ordained that the ancient canonical decrees of the transmarine fathers should be observed in England, brought this country into line with the continent. Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, and also Egbert, Archbishop of York, whose *Penitentials*[1] appeared in the middle of the eighth century, restated the position. The former insisted to his clergy that there was to be no mass or Christian burial for suicides unless insane; although, he says, " some allow for mass for suicides through instantaneous distraction ". King Edgar, in 967, finally gave a civil blessing and sanction to these penalties. After this date they underwent no important modifications, and the assimilation of ecclesiastical to civil law which took place at the Reformation did not bring about any change of doctrine on this subject. A rubric in the prayer-book, prefixed to the burial service after the Restoration of 1660, reveals the old outlook unaltered. It reads as follows: " Here it is to be noted, that the office ensuing is not to be used for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands on themselves." Thus it is fair to say that from the thirteenth century the Canon law of suicide has remained fundamentally unaltered.

Donne's interpretation of the Church's position throws an interesting light on the Canon law. To uphold suicide, he says, was never heretical, and no dogma of the Church con-

" . . . But that great command o'er sways the order,
She should in ground unsanctified have lodged,
Till the last trumpet; for charitable prayers,
Shards, flints, and pebbles should be thrown on her;
Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants,
Her maiden strewments, and the bringing home
Of bell and burial."

[1] The *Penitentials* were a sort of manual compiled for the parish priest from the Canon law and other sources. They laid down correct ritual and procedure, and guided him in the imposition of penances.

demns it. Suicide was not unchristian and anyone was entitled to an opinion on the matter, because it had not been dealt with by real Canon law but only by the Canons of the Councils. He goes on to make a wide distinction between the two types of law, and complains at the attempted usurpation of authority by the Councils. As he points out, it is out of all proportion for the Diocesan Council of Antisidor at which only one bishop was present to presume to dictate on so important a subject.

Further, Donne argues, Canon law never condemns suicide as actually criminal. It would have no right to do so. For instance, it is impossible to deduce the criminality of suicide from the Council of Braga, because the penalties which true Canon law imposed against men killed at the tilt in tournaments—certainly not a criminal death—included a similar refusal of Christian burial. Donne's conclusion is that the Canon law against suicide is accorded a very exaggerated respect and that it is the expression of a prejudice rather than an accepted orthodox dogma.[1]

The development of the secular law with regard to suicide

[1] The Muslim prohibition of suicide is more explicit and authentic than the Christian. Self-destruction among the true Arabs is, and always has been, rare. For this the absolute prohibition of the Koran is partly responsible. "O believers, says the prophet, commit not suicide. . . . Whoever shall do this maliciously and wrongfully, we will in the end cast him into the fire." Even more, perhaps, have the racial propensities of the Arab and the doctrine of Kismet been influential in preventing suicide. The patience of the Arab when facing pain, and his acceptance of danger, and trouble, are notorious. Life to this race is not a matter for speculation or distaste. They identify themselves immediately and uncomplainingly with its ebb and flow. T. E. Lawrence wrote of the Arabs that he knew: "The least morbid of peoples, they had accepted the gift of life unquestioningly, as axiomatic. To them it was a thing inevitable, entailed on man, a usufruct, beyond control. Suicide was a thing impossible, and death no grief."

in the Middle Ages is more complicated and difficult to trace than the Canon law. It varied from place to place and, as it was based on custom, is without any sort of uniformity. In fact, in many countries, custom remained as the basis of suicide procedure long after one would have expected it to have been given a coherent shape and legal authority. It is in these early and local suicide customs that one sees the vulgar uneducated suicide-horror at its most vindictive. The popular, unreflective, and brutal element persists in the later legal rationalizations of these customs, but there the economic desire to deter, working from above, is also visible, often even intensifying purely popular sentiment.

Though King Edgar, it is sometimes claimed, linked suicide to murder, his union must have been ineffectual because Bracton, the legal authority of his time, writing in the thirteenth century, does not rank suicide as a felony. Thus fifty years after Magna Charta the suicide was not yet legally a criminal in England. His fate, however, was in the melting-pot. Many of Bracton's contemporaries had not agreed with him, and by the middle of the next century, in spite of Bracton's ruling, the person who intentionally took his life had become guilty of *felo-de-se*. This assimilation of suicide to felony came about in two ways. First, the connection between suicide and self-murder had been early established in the Church and among the common people; from these sources it crept into legislation at a later date. Secondly, it is probable that the growing practice of exacting a forfeiture of goods when a sane man killed himself (the same forfeiture occurred when people died obstinately refusing to make a will), had something to do with it. Forfeiture was the special penalty for felonies, and since the suicide forfeited his goods it came in time to be presumed that he must also be a felon.

Primitive superstition, religion, economic pressure, and a legal coincidence, all combined to produce secular penalties

against suicide, yet the law as it develops divides quite simply into two parts: the first deals with the property of the suicide, the second deals with his body. Property confiscations after suicide go back, as we have seen, to the Roman confiscations which took place when a man accused of crime committed suicide. Throughout our period some similar distinction seems very often to have been made between criminal and innocent suicides. Although in France Saint Louis enforced the *general* seizure of suicides' property, this was probably an exceptional application of the letter of the law, occasioned by his Christian zeal. In other reigns and in various districts more leniency was shown. The Constitution of Charles V, for instance, in 1551 readopted the old Roman distinction, and the law only proceeded against those who had committed suicide when under accusation of felony. The same attitude was taken by the Parliament of Toulouse, and nearly a century later by the Parliament of Paris (1634).

In England, Bracton records a more delicate distinction: the ordinary suicide forfeited his goods, but the person who committed suicide to avoid conviction for a felony forfeited both goods *and* lands. In some cases it was possible for the heir to buy back the confiscated goods; and in 1289 we find the widow of one Aubrey of Wystelesburg redeeming her husband's confiscated property for £300. Finally, Bracton adds that "the madman, or the idiot, or the infant, or the person under such acute pain as to produce a temporary distraction, who kills himself, shall forfeit neither lands nor chattels, because he is deprived of reason". For the ordinary English suicide, however, as far as his *goods* were concerned, the law of forfeiture which came in with the Danes remained theoretically unaltered until the second half of the nineteenth century. In practice it was rarely enforced after the mid-eighteenth. On the other hand, the right of the law to confiscate a suicide's *lands* was never absolutely established. Cowell, writing in 1630, says that there were doubts about

the legality of such confiscation in his time, and Coke's Institutes, fourteen years later, mention only the confiscation of goods and chattels, definitely excluding the forfeiture of land. We can for the whole of Europe only sum up the question of forfeiture in the broadest terms: it is simply true to say that everywhere from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century suicide of one sort or another entailed seizure of goods or land, or both; the usage was often based upon custom and so varied considerably from place to place.

The second and more severe revenge that medieval law and custom took on the suicide was not on his chattels but on his corpse. Little by little the idea that the sin of suicide *must* be punished gained authority. Since the author of the suicide was untouchable, the next best thing seemed to be to visit the sin posthumously on his body. Thus it arose that the corpse of the suicide fell into the hands of the law, or was subjected by custom to curious indignities. Most of the latter had a definitely religious and superstitious, rather than a legal background, and are obviously of great antiquity. In England, for instance, one custom prescribed that the body should enter the churchyard by the wall and not go in by the gate; another rather similar custom laid down that a suicide must leave the room in which he had died, "not by the door but through some hole or pit made under the threshold of the door". More often, as in the city of Danzig where the window-frame was subsequently burned, the persecuted corpse had to go out through the window. A gruesome and famous usage, commoner in England than elsewhere, was the burial of suicides by night at a cross-roads; a stake was driven through the breast safely to imprison the spirit that might otherwise have wandered.

Each country and town had its own forms of procedure against the corpse. Thus in some places a distinction was apparently made for women suicides, whose bodies were burnt. In France the connection made between suicide and

homicide led to the corpse being dragged, like that of a criminal, head downward on a hurdle through the streets. Fulbecke, writing in 1601, shows the results of the same connection of ideas in England. The suicide, he says, "is drawn by an horse to the place of punishment and shame, where he is hanged on a gibbet, and none may take the body down but by the authority of the magistrate". At Metz in the fifteenth century we find that attempted suicides were severely beaten, while successful ones were put in a barrel and floated down the Moselle, whence presumably they were eventually carried out to sea. This was evidently a practical way of getting the tainted body, the blood-guilt, out of the limits of the community. The laws of Zürich are perhaps more interesting than any other as their provisions show clearly an underlying primitive desire to imprison the dissatisfied errant spirit at all costs. They ordain particularly that the suicide who has taken his life by throwing himself from a height is to be buried *under a mountain* whose whole weight shall, as it were, press down upon his restive soul; similarly the suicide by drowning is to be buried under sand. The latter penalty is similar to a widespread usage which ordained that suicides were to be interred on the seashore in the sand below high-water mark.

Such degradation of the corpse does not seem to have been legalized until fairly late. In France it does not appear in legal texts before the fourteenth century, though naturally it had been practised very much earlier. In England it seems never to have been properly legalized, and Blackstone, in the eighteenth century, finds no written authority for it, though as a jurist his general attitude to suicide is one of condemnation. He says: "The suicide is guilty of a double offence: one spiritual in evading the prerogative of the Almighty; the other temporal, against the King, who hath an interest in the preservation of his subjects." This being the case, the suicide, he says, forfeits his goods and chattels

to the king, and the coroner issues a warrant that the body shall be buried in some public highway. No mention of the stake occurs even in the coroner's warrant, and it seems to have had no vestige of legality.

Though having no legal authority, degradation of the corpse nevertheless existed in England as a practice of the Coroners' Courts for many centuries. By 1823, however, it had long fallen into abeyance[1] and a statute of that year states that no coroner shall issue a warrant for the burial of a suicide in any highway, but that the body shall be buried privately in a churchyard between nine and twelve at night without religious rites.

In a general survey of the treatment accorded to the corpse and goods of the suicide, one thing stands out—the severity of Civil as compared to Canon law. This is perhaps the more curious when one remembers that the crystalization of suicide-custom into secular law is always fairly late, and occurs chiefly from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. Whereas the chief period of the Church's legislative activity against suicide was in the sixth century. This added severity is explained, however, if one looks into the two chief sources of secular suicide legislation. The first source, as might be expected, is the already familiar suicide-horror of the uneducated peasant type. Legislation, deriving on the one hand direct from local custom, incorporated this horror as a very strong element which expressed itself more forcibly than it could hope to do through a barrier of Christian belief and education, and in the framework of the Church.

Secondly, there was the economic factor. To the priest suicide was a sin concerning the soul and God alone; to the

[1] In 1823 a suicide named Griffiths was interred at the intersection of Grosvenor Place and the King's Road, Chelsea. This was the last degradation of the corpse in England and must have been exceptional even at that date.

lord it was a sin against society. As the latter it called not merely for condemnation, but for a type of punishment that would act as a *deterrent* to others. It is particularly interesting that secular opposition to suicide should have crystalized into law in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the feudal system was breaking up—when, in other words, the loss of a single one of one's "men" would have been more keenly felt than a century or two earlier. The deterrent element with its economic basis was always particularly in evidence in France, not only in our period but later in the time of Louis XIV (see page 191). In the fifteenth century we find that the body of one Louis de Beaumont was to be dragged "*le plus cruellement qu'il se pourra, pour monstrer l'experience aux autres*". An indication that the powers were not so much concerned with the sinfulness of suicide as with its prevention among the people, who, no matter *how* they lived, were exploitable *while* they lived.

At a time when it was not usual to search out economic causes for social attitudes, Donne shrewdly pointed to the practical basis of anti-suicide legislation. Discovering that the confusion of suicide with homicide "hath no foundation in Naturall nor Emperiall Law . . . having by custome onely put on the nature of law", he proceeds to the economic root of the matter. Though slavery, he says, has come to an end, the number of wretched labouring men still far exceeds the happy; for this reason it was "thought necessary by lawes and by opinion of Religion to take from those weary and macerated wretches, their ordinary and open escape and ease, voluntary death". Mahomet, says Donne, "to withdraw his Nation from wine, brought them to a religious beliefe, that in every grape there was a Devill"; similarly, he concludes, was the ordinary man of the Middle Ages frightened away from suicide, an act often harmless in itself.

Such, then, were the secular penalties against suicide. Directed against chattels and the corpse, they were inspired

by twin forces—popular horror and economic fears. Based on custom, they varied from place to place, but their type was always the same and they persisted everywhere in Europe—at least on paper—until the French Revolution.

VII. A HESITATION

In spite of this steadily accumulating mass of legislation and prejudice there did appear for a brief period the vestiges of a reasoned attitude. This perceptible pro-suicide sympathy coincided with that embryonic civilization sketched out in the dark Middle Ages by Charlemagne. The impetus which made it possible for him to foster a revival of learning and to launch his famous palace-academy came oddly enough from England. There religious influences from Ireland and Rome had created a certain intellectual artistocracy, and people like Alcuin and Scotus Ereginus brought to France a respect for the classics and learning, for order and reasonableness. The spirit of this early renascence, which penetrated every walk of life, was not likely to overlook the Canon law. The general attitude to suicide and the suicide legislation of the sixth century were foremost among the things calculated to jar on an enlightened mind and to come into conflict with ideas that a new respect for classical studies had put about. Consequently, throughout this period one can trace a tendency that tempered popular severity towards suicides and even succeeded in softening for a while the earlier legislation.

Though in the first half of the eighth century the Venerable Bede had again affirmed the theory of the self-inflicted nature of Christ's death on the cross, ideas more favourable to suicide did not begin to take practical shape until after 800. In A.D. 829 the definitive text of the *Penitentials* was issued. These now provided that masses should be said for insane suicides, and prayers for those who committed suicide

through the vexations of the devil. It is most interesting to note the appearance of the now familiar insanity excuse. This ever since has been the subterfuge of the forces of intelligence in their attempts to modify suicide legislation without causing an open breach with popular prejudice.

In 878 the Council of Troyes further officially modified the strictness of sixth-century legislation by admitting certain funeral rites to suicides. Even St. Augustine's writings, for the contrast they presented to the absolute severity of the intervening period, now came to be quoted in support of moderation; and Pope Nicholas I announced that all suicides must be buried—though with the saving popular clause that this was " only lest the omission should be offensive to others ". Even a certain general support was lent to the efforts of the *élite* by events in Spain. There the Muslim persecutions led to a spate of martyrdoms, many of them voluntary, and a certain popular enthusiasm was aroused, similar to that of the early Christian period.

But this relative and guarded leniency towards suicides was not to last. It was not more than a perceptible hesitation on the way that led down to the seventh circle of the inferno. With the break up of Charlemagne's premature civilization the old attitude of absolute condemnation returned. We have, in fact, already watched its reflection and intensification in later canon and secular law. Before turning to its final intellectual and imaginative expression in the two greatest figures of the later Middle Ages, we must see how a desire for death expressed itself in spite of such concerted opposition.

VIII. THE OUTCASTS

It is the fashion to say that there was practically no suicide in the Middle Ages, and that Christianity and feudalism combined to create a world where everyone accepted that

state of life to which God and his lord had called him. There were, it is argued, no square pegs in round holes and no influences at work tending to break down the resistances with which people counter a longing for death. Fifty years ago a writer on the subject was unable to find any notable suicides between A.D. 400 and A.D. 1400. In a sense he was right. The individualistic suicide, arising from the maladjustment of a highly developed personality, such as we know to-day, was rare enough. Society was carefully integrated, and over long periods comparatively stable. Church and State between them helped to shoulder so many of a man's problems that the individual was not often faced by those questionings and awful decisions which lead to suicide. Problems of "why" and "whither" did not usually crop up for the ordinary person; and, if they did, a solicitous Church had the right answers pat. In a well-knit society where responsibilities, duties, and privileges, were cut and dried, and where the individual found a satisfying extension of his personality in his local community and, beyond, in the universal Church of Christ, there was not much cause or excuse for the suicidal misfit. Within the temporal and spiritual framework a man's problems were perhaps less teasing than at any other time in history.

Outside the framework it was a very different story. The heretic, the Jew, the witch, the excommunicate, were in a terrible solitude. The isolation of life in a modern city is not even comparable with their loneliness. Looking at the logical pattern of medieval times one is apt to miss the rents, the frightening interstices. Your eye is not attuned to the gloominess of the landscape these gaps reveal —the old woman's hovel, the blasted heath, the intellectual hopelessly alone before the circle of inquisitorial faces. Outside the accepted framework there was nothing, absolutely nothing, on which the individual could lean. The old pagan ideas of belief in the self and pride in humanity and the

human solution of problems had long before disappeared. Nothing had yet come to replace them. Among all these unfortunates outside the pale, who often had nothing and no one to turn to, the death instinct found an easy discharge. Perhaps among these classes the Middle Ages provide a higher suicide figure than any other period.

The bullying and absolute non-recognition of minorities is one of the salient features of the Middle Ages and the Catholic Church. A study of the causes of suicide at the time brings one into contact with a sadism and a misapplication of ideals that are astounding. Among the heretics we find not only cases of individual suicide brought about by fear and direct persecution, but a general recurrence of the suicide-martyrdom phenomenon, which was so common among the orthodox Christians at an earlier date. At Orleans in the eleventh century an heretical movement was suppressed and its leaders condemned to death. When the rank and file of the unorthodox heard of the sentence they eagerly affirmed their membership of the sect and demanded that they should be burnt with their chiefs. In order to damp their ardour, the pile was actually lighted and they were brought to see it. The smell of smoke and the sight of the burning faggots failed however to dissuade them, so their wish was granted, and large numbers were burnt with their leaders.

The most numerous and famous suicide-martyrs of the Middle Ages were the Albigenses. The ferocity with which this heresy was put down is, of course, a byword. In 1218 alone some five thousand people in Southern France were put to death as heretics. Since the Albigensian heresy was on a high spiritual level, and since the lives of its supporters were far better than those of the average priest, drastic repression was certainly necessary. The measures taken were altogether successful, and thus in the early thirteenth century a body of enlightened doctrine was lost to Europe. The heretics

believed in the abolition of marriage and of private property, and tried to detach themselves from the interests of the world even while living in the world; the value of companionship, vegetarianism and the metaphorical explanation of miracles, were further features of the sect. It was for beliefs such as these that hundreds of them sought out death as suicide martyrs. Near Narbonne a hundred and forty *perfecti*, as their spiritual overseers were called, not waiting for their executioners, flung themselves on to a burning pyre. Elsewhere, seventy-four knights, given the choice between death and the recantation of their heresy, chose the former and themselves mounted willingly on to the scaffold. Another story illustrates well how the authorities recognized and made use of this suicidal tendency among the Albigenses. Simon de Montfort, the chief butcher in the suppression, having taken some prisoners, handed them over to the Abbot of Citeaux. The latter, as a good churchman, was most anxious that they should die, but, as a priest, he was most unwilling to condemn them to death himself. He therefore hit on the expedient of offering them the alternatives of punishment, or liberty with recantation, expecting (as he says) that very few would buy their liberty so dearly. He was right. Most of the prisoners leapt with eagerness into the fire which he had prepared.

Another sort of suicide peculiar to the Albigenses stands out from the rest of the voluntary deaths of the period. It was calm, purely religious, and almost ritualistic. After receiving the *consolamentum* (a composite rite which displaced at once baptism, the Eucharist and absolution) it was not unusual for sick people to refuse all further food or even to weaken themselves by bleeding and so to achieve death. This voluntary fast, or *endura*, had as its object their transference to heaven when in a state of guiltlessness and ensured a certain passage into eternal happiness.

Those other perpetual heretics and outcasts, the Jews,

provide the second large source of suicide. England here supplies some charming episodes. The manners of indigent monarchs to their Jewish bankers conform pretty much to pattern, and in our period the protection offered to Jewry by the English kings was payed for in diverse ways. The notoriously ingenious device of extracting the Jews' teeth to ease their pockets is probably apocryphal, but no more drastic than other methods used to aid the exchequer. So long as the Jews remained under such efficient, but painful, protection their case was not too bad. They had little to fear from the people. In the twelfth century, however, the crusades induced a particularly strong and fanatical intolerance; and the country in the early years of Richard Coeur de Lion's reign saw a series of pogroms. These were on more than one occasion forestalled by mass suicides on the part of the unfortunate Jews. At York it appears that as many as five hundred killed each other in this way. It is a grim story. Idle Crusaders and indebted gentry started a nocturnal assault on the Jewish community. The majority, warned in time, fled to the castle, where they were received by the constable. At York, as elsewhere, the authorities were always willing to offer an asylum to Jews; though they would take no measures against their persecutors. The constable, having left the castle on business, returned to find the gates, owing to some error, closed against him. Anger and misunderstanding resulted in the sheriffs giving orders for the assault of the castle. The Jews, in self-protection, took control of the latter, and a full-fledged siege ensued. A fanatical hermit, robed in white, spurred on the besiegers in this minor crusade. When after several days of assault and blockade it seemed inevitable that the Jewish "garrison" must surrender, a courageous rabbi exhorted them not to fall alive into gentile hands. A large majority took this counsel, cutting the throats of their wives and children, firing the building over their heads and finally

killing each other. Next day a mere handful surrendered, hoping that they might save their lives by offering to be baptized. The fanaticism of the mob and the strange chivalry of the crusaders refused their offer. They dispatched the remnant in cold blood. A century later in France we find the same sort of thing still happening. Forty Jews seized and thrown into prison on a trumped up charge of poisoning, killed each other to a man, and at Verdun in 1320 more Jewish suicides took place, running into hundreds. It is interesting to notice that these and similar Jewish suicides were all in the tradition described by Josephus in his account of the fall of Jerusalem. The individuals did not take their own lives, but acted as executioners to each other.[1]

Among smaller classes of unfortunates, who outside the social framework were forced into suicide, we must mention witches and the divorced wives of priests. When, in the eleventh century, Hildebrand, to secure the celibacy of his clergy, not only forbade them to marry, but forced them to abandon the women with whom they were already living, the latter (tradition says) in many cases committed suicide. There was no place for them in the careful framework of the Middle Ages. But perhaps the most lost and isolated class of all were the witches. The suicides of these unfortunate and persecuted women are notorious and traditional. They had themselves no hope, and ignorant communities showed them no mercy. It was often preferable to die by their own hands rather than wait for the inevitable day when they would be hauled off to the flames amid general delight. Sprenger, in his *In Malleo Maleficarum*, tells how the witches of North Germany frequently

[1] There is no reason to believe that Jewish persecution-suicides have ever ceased. The Spanish Inquisition took its toll when Torquemada drove the Jews and *conversos* into Africa, and cases must have been frequent in Germany since 1931.

made away with themselves, or when they were hauled off to prison strung themselves up in their cells, or took their lives in any way they could. The last witch seems to have been burnt in Ireland in the nineteenth century: this is the nearest point in a perspective of many centuries during which these casual outcasts had literally nowhere to turn but death. There is hardly a village or a stretch of country in the wilder parts of the British Isles which has not still its ruined witch's hovel or witches' corner. Such places mark the spot where a frightened and toothless old hag lived and tried in vain to combat local prejudice; suicide or the stake were often the last alternatives that remained to her.

There were, in addition, times when the *cadre* of society itself temporarily broke up and for a moment the ordinary man may have felt himself almost as much on his own as the witch and the heretic. Such times were the plague years and the occasions of strange epidemic visitations. These scourges were so rude and devastating that they shook even the stability of the medieval system. Not only was the horror and fear of universal death upon them, but people suddenly found that the habitual *tempo* and customary relationships of life had broken down. They were called upon to make efforts and adjustments for which they felt themselves incapable. In the seventh century Roger of Wendover reports something very like an epidemic of suicide arising as the result of a pestilence which swept the country at that time. During the Black Death in the fourteenth century the same sort of thing occurred over a wider area and for a greater period. Defoe, in his *Journal of the Plague Year*, proves that three hundred years later similar suicides were still common. "Some," he says, "threw themselves out at windows or shot themselves, or otherwise made themselves away, and I saw several dismal objects of that kind." (There were other diseases, of course, like the Dancing Manias in Germany and Italy in the fifteenth century, which

were often directly suicidal in their development and symptoms.)

Outside these exceptional categories it is true to say that suicide was cut down to a minimum in the Middle Ages. Yet all the same within the normal functioning of society a desire for death, though repressed, found a certain expression. It is very significant that this expression was chiefly confined to the upper and educated class where, as has been pointed out, both the primitive and economic prejudice against suicide carried least weight and where the penalties do not seem to have been enforced. It is interesting to notice that these personal and individualistic suicides fall under familiar headings—two are classic types, honour and devotion; one is mainly a Christian type, chastity.[1] Of the first type Raoul de Neele, Constable of France, is a romantic fourteenth-century example. When he was taken at the disastrous battle of Courtrai, the Flemish burghers wished to spare his life. But seven hundred pairs of gold spurs, the insignia of knighthood, were lying on the field, and the Constable said that he had no wish to live now that "*toute la fleur de crestienneté*" had died in battle. Throwing himself on his captors, he compelled them to kill him. The suicide of Regnault, Comte de Boulogne, in prison after the battle of Bouvines, comes in the same category; as does also Joan of Arc's attempt at suicide while in prison at Beaurevoir. She threw herself from her cell window because, she said, she preferred to die than fall into the hands of the English. In her trial this attempted suicide was used against her by the bishops, who pretended to find in it one more proof of her susceptibility to the spirit of evil.

At all times suicides for devotion seem particularly noble and untainted. Perhaps this is because of a vague connection

[1] The only suicide recorded outside these categories between the fifth and fourteenth centuries seems to be that of Merovius, son of Chilperic, when ambushed by his father's men in 577.

somewhere in our minds with the fully sanctioned ritualistic wife-suicides of early times, and other civilizations. Such suicides have never ceased altogether, and in our period we find Blanche of Castille wanting to kill herself out of grief for the death of her husband, Louis VIII. What her entourage would not allow her to do, other women achieved.

Lastly, the chastity-suicide continues to occur here and there. For the barbarian invasions of earlier centuries we now get the raids and incursions of the Northmen. In Normandy many women found death the only satisfactory reaction to the coming of the invaders; and we have already seen the steps, perhaps even more courageous, that the Yorkshire nuns took to preserve their chastity.

From the crusades comes a story which proves that, among the upper class at any rate, suicide for the preservation of chastity was not regarded as a particularly odd or immoral act. Margaret, wife of St. Louis (so Joinville reports), fearing to fall into the hands of the Saracens, supplicated the eighty-year-old knight who slept in her chamber during her husband's absence: "*Je vous demant, fist elle, par la foy que vous m'avez baillie que, se le Sarrazin prennent ceste ville, que vous me coupez la teste avant qu'ils me preignent.*" To which the knight answered: "*Soiés certeinne que je le ferai volontiers; car le l'avoie ja bien enpensei, que vous occiroie avant qu'il nous eussent pris.*" Such a reply shows that the suicide-horror, though general, had not penetrated everywhere among the upper class and that a desire for death, though unsanctioned, persisted in finding an outlet throughout the Dark Ages.

IX. THE INFERNO

Abelard, so often a problem to the tenth-century Church, never thought to question the orthodox views on suicide. Perhaps to a person of his vitality the question would have

appeared irrelevant. At all events, after the collapse of Charlemagne's civilization, opinion was once more setting too strongly against suicide for even his eloquence to have been effective in its advocacy. Suicides to Saint Bruno in the next century were simply "martyrs for Satan". Obviously opinion had moved on so far since the days of Saint Augustine that a new and authoritative statement of the position was required. In his *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas supplied it. In this comprehensive work suicide naturally had its allotted place. Given his premises, Aquinas of course treats the question quietly and logically. To begin with, the old pagan pro-suicide arguments are quoted (these serve as mere dummies to be later demolished), followed by Augustine's argument assimilating suicide to murder. Aquinas then goes on to develop his own position, and for three reasons finds that suicide is absolutely wrong. First, it is unnatural. Every man bears an instinctive charity towards himself and should desire to do himself no harm. Suicide, since it is both uncharitable and contrary to the natural laws, is a mortal sin. His second argument harks back to Aristotle. Every man is a member of some community. He is not an individual unit, and his duties and responsibilities touch even his death. Suicide, therefore, is anti-social. Lastly, life is the gift of God; yet, though given, it still remains *His*; it is *His* property. The man, therefore, who takes his own life may be compared to a person who kills someone else's slave. The slave-owner is robbed by the loss of his servant, God by the loss of a life. Suicide is therefore an act against divine property. The sinfulness of suicide is thus restated intellectually. It only remains for Dante to draw his conclusions. Imagination follows the sinners to the underworld.

Dante is precise; there is no trimming in his hell. Justice comes full circle, and to each sin and failure he awards the punishment that seemed merited to a poet of the time.

Below the heretic and the murderer, beyond the Styx and the river of blood, Virgil leads him to the suicides. In a pathless wood whose foliage seemed too dark and dull to be called green, Dante heard wailings on every side. Not believing that he stepped in a forest of dead men or that warped and gnarled trees could have human voices, he put out a hand and plucked a twig from a great thorn. Its trunk cried to him, "Why dost thou rend me? Men we were and now are turned to trees." So Dante found that every tree and bush there in the wood was the soul of a suicide. Pier delle Vigne, once Frederick II's chosen minister, his blood trickling out where the twig had been newly snapped, relates how the spirit that tears itself from its own body, is flung by Minos to the seventh gulf and falling in that wood sprouts where it chances, like a grain of spelt. Shot to a sapling and grown up, the harpies come to feed upon its leaves and bring it pain; and thus it lives out, in the gloomy wood, an endless punishment. So Diogenes Laertes's wise men, stripped of their honours, lost even the shape of gods and mortals. The punishment was ironical. Stoic pride, and the belief in individual action, could have little scope in the limitation of leaves and twigs. These dead could not hope to repeat the self-assertive gesture which ended their lives. The Roman spirit had been circumvented. A thousand years had sadly reduced the men who handled their own destiny and who boasted that, thanks to knife and cup and rope, their honour was inviolable and their life only bad as long as they chose to tolerate it.

A fresh light and liberation were soon due to penetrate the bleeding branches of the wood. Dante's visit marked a nadir in the fortunes of the wise men. Their rescuers were already at hand.